

Comparing Models of Civil Disobedience in Environmental Activism: Greenpeace's Anti-CFC Campaign and Fridays for Future School Strikes

This essay compares and contrasts two case studies of civil disobedience within environmental activism: Greenpeace's direct actions during the campaign against chlorofluorocarbons in the 1980s and the contemporary school strikes organised by Fridays for Future.

The decision to compare and contrast these specific case studies is not arbitrary, as both movements seek to influence climate and environmental governance through non-violent disruption (NVCD), while differing in their organisational structure, source of legitimacy and modes of public engagement.

Furthermore, the scope of the analysis is deliberately limited to Greenpeace's use of direct action during the anti-CFC campaign and Fridays for Future's deployment of school strikes as a form of civil disobedience, rather than the full range of activities undertaken by either movement. Drawing on selected theoretical literature on civil and political disobedience, the essay analyses how different types of protest shape perceptions of legitimacy, effectiveness and ethical justification in the context of the climate emergency.

To appropriately begin, an explanation of **what** civil disobedience consists of is necessary. While definitions vary, they converge on the understanding that civil disobedience is a form of principled protest through which participants express dissatisfaction with existing political arrangements and seek to draw attention to harm caused by political action or inaction. Most importantly, this understanding of civil disobedience shifts attention away from the mere fact of illegality and towards a broader set of questions about legitimacy, responsibility and political accountability. (Scheuerman, 2021; Arendt, 1972; Welchman, 2001)

The most crucial aspect of discussion, before any comparison or contrast of cases can be introduced is the establishment of specific criteria by which these can be analysed. The often contested aspect of Civil Disobedience is the legality of the actions performed and if those are within the boundaries of the law. By definition, Civil disobedience steps out of the comfort zone of the written set of laws and instead focuses on the moral responsibility to correct aspects that the law either ignores, or outright harms. Therefore, for any action to be considered not a simple crime, but an act of disobedience, the aspect of legitimacy comes into play. In the 1980s, during the Greenpeace's actions against CFCs and the 2010s onwards Fridays for Future school strikes both movements sought to gain legitimacy, going about it in a different, yet similar way, underscoring how important it is for the movements themselves. The very reason the legitimacy is needed is because it gives a sense of moral protection, therefore it encourages people to participate, change views and limits the legal actions taken by the law enforcement that may wish to preserve its image as just. Legitimacy can be gained through various means, but predominantly it either comes from the views and actions being grounded in scientific research, knowledge, education and the statements of widely recognised experts or through the moral and social authority – values held by vast groups of people directly affected, or not, by the injustice and harm – youth and future generations, with the future generations being a variable that may or may not occur, yet the very idea of which places heavy burden of moral responsibility on those alive now. (Welchman, 2001)

Legitimacy also gives validity for the disruptions that are used as means of achieving the goals. A peaceful protest that is quiet, does not obstruct anything, does not disrupt the flow of daily activities is often not successful and is akin to an honorary statement (akin to symbolic acts with little practical consequence). Those bring no change and have little effect on the change, unless they lead to another movement, ready to take charge and change things even through drastic means. Disruptions, of various kinds, as demonstrated by both examples mentioned above, forces those in Power and the Public Opinion to react. Even negative reaction in such a case brings forth a discussion. Of course, every disruption has to be carefully planned and balanced. There is a vast difference between a David vs Goliath disruption of massive tankers by small boats and planting explosives to disrupt chain of production through forceful eradication of property, putting not only

people, but also the environment itself at risk. If the acceptable boundaries (often subjective) are crossed, the movement may lose its legitimacy and therefore become not only considered wrong, but also hazardous, which not only damages the reputation, but puts any reasonable discussion of the actual harm that said movement fights against or brings attention to, on indefinite hold whilst adding negative connotations associated with the movement itself. (Snow et al., 2018)

Following the above, having established the scope and criteria of comparison, the next parts of this essay will focus on Greenpeace's actions in the 1980s against the CFC and ozone hole and later on Fridays For Future, fighting quite a similar cause of environmental crisis. The following sections will seek to highlight actions of both movements within the scope described, rather than the entirety of their actions, goals and history, their strength and weaknesses.

The 1980s were a time when CFC were widely used in aerosols worldwide, the companies using them relied on the cheap production costs without any care for the harm these may be causing or potentially because of the limited knowledge they had about their effect. At the same time the scientists discovered the ozone hole over the Antarctica and studied the cause of its appearance, coming to the conclusion that CFC were directly tied to it. Unfortunately, the scientists themselves and their advice were disregarded as it was easy to omit. The companies using these substances had no intention of changing the way things worked, as the production costs could potentially increase, either reducing costs or risking raising prices which would directly affect the customers. Said customers were also used to these substances and without widespread information about the harmful effects, remained ignorant and happy to continue going on as they have. This gave birth to Greenpeace as a movement. Greenpeace, largely, did not base their legitimacy on ideology itself or morality. It used scientific reports and experts to claim validity and justification for their actions. They were also quite skilled at what they did. They managed to frame the dangers caused by CFC as direct cause of the ozone hole, highlighting the dangers of it. They put themselves in the role of knights 'acting on behalf of the planet' with the backing of world-leading experts that could not be ignored in conjunction with Greenpeace's actions. Greenpeace used a very specific rhetoric, they used the media to portray their actions the way they knew would affect people and force governments to act. They presented themselves as 'the small person fighting against harmful corporations'. (Tufekci, 2017)

Greenpeace's strength included their clear goal, their ability to effectively use the disruptions to their advantages and the outcomes of those disruptions themselves. They managed to force those in power to act, finally resulting in the 1989's Montreal Protocol which banned the CFC, limiting the harmful influences and provided guidelines necessary to protect the ozone layer.

Where there are strengths, there are also weaknesses. Greenpeace's use of experts to gain legitimacy led to its elitism, limiting the number of people that could participate, whilst this may or may not have made it easier to plan and organise the disruptions as needed, it also put a heavy burden on a limited group of people – including highlighting them to the law enforcement and putting their very lives at risk therefore. They also had to heavily rely on the media. Whilst they had the skills to manipulate the images presented, had the psychological knowledge of those effects, they also relied on the public media presenting their work in an approving light, as those same media could have easily present them as mistaken, illegal, harmful and dangerous. It was a gamble they won, but it was a gamble nonetheless.

The reason Greenpeace is a benchmark case study for comparison is because of its clear structure, goals and specific historical context – CFC were the 'enemy', it was not a fight about the 'evil government' that harms its citizens by segregating them, but rather a man-made product that would cause a man-made catastrophe. It allowed the governments to act as the savior, rather than being seen as the evil. CFC therefore were also an easier target than the entire climate emergency. Climate emergency had no one specific to blame, other than collective actions of humans, therefore there was no clear evil that people could comfortably point their fingers at. With CFC being made into Greenpeace's target, that finger had something to point out.

The Climate Emergency was not stopped by the Montreal Protocol, it continued and it required someone to finally, collectively point finger at the humanity and governments. This was

not something an elite movement like Greenpeace could do whilst maintaining their control over their organisation. At this point it is important to move the discussion towards the Fridays For Future, a clear movement, rather than any sort of organisation.

Fridays For Future settled themselves within a slightly different context, rather than specific cause causing specific effect, it highlights the climate emergency as a problem stretched through time, one that has been affecting people for a long while and led to a crucial point where immediate action and change is needed. Fridays For Future, in their intensive phase of School Strikes, used the rhetoric that if people don't wish to save the planet for themselves (often people would deny the need to act as they would 'no longer be here' by the time catastrophic action would occur), they should do it for the future generations, if they wish those future generations to have any sort of stable, healthy life on a liveable planet at all. Fridays For Future pitted Youth, still at school against governments of different tiers, showing their inaction and incompetency when faced with something as terrible and as hard to solve as the Climate Emergency. The youth, as a group held no specific formal power, and the one they had, like student councils, were often limited and censored by adults overseeing them. Nevertheless, they not only suffered consequences for their actions (suspensions or threats of expulsions) but they also feared the future consequences in the years to come. This directly contrasts the situation with CFCs – this time there was no single thing to blame, this was the call for general, collective responsibility of people around the globe. (Dupuis-Deri, 2021)

Fridays For Future as a civil disobedience movement gains its legitimacy in a different way than a centralised one like Greenpeace, it is neither elitist nor bases its claims on scientists only. Fridays For Future approach the matter from another perspective, they utilise moral authority and claims of intergenerational responsibility towards unevenly distributed consequences of climate crisis to reach the people and justify their actions. The lack of political influence of the youth is considered a disproportion of responsibility, accountability and power to implement change, as it will be the next generations, not the ones in the positions of authority that will have to shoulder the consequences of the actions of the current governance, therefore Fridays For Future frames the Climate Emergency as an issue of intergenerational justice. Those currently in power utilise their feeling of lack of urgency and the available resources to make decisions that suit their current state, whilst laying the costs with the future generations that have no influence on the 'now'. Although the future generations, as mentioned before, are yet to come, they may, and in accordance to FFF movement they are, present in the decision-making process. Although not as drastic as Greenpeace's actions against CFCs, Fridays For Future school strikes are their own form of civil disobedience, not against the Criminal Law, but against Civil regulations. If the Law is to be treated as binding set of rules, written and authorised for execution by others, School Regulations and Educational Decrees that require attendance are their own form of Law. The Youth attending the School Strikes faced punishments, suspensions, possible expulsions as well as delegitimisation due to their social status as minors by the Adults in charge of the schools. Their actions were not free of risk and could be considered sacrificial, an aspect Civil Disobedience includes. Their readiness to suffer those consequences increases their legitimacy. But, considering their ways of achieving the legitimacy needed for their actions to be considered Civil Disobedience rather than willful disorder, there are some demerits to the way Fridays For Future achieves that. Moral Authority, whilst strong symbolically, it is weaker politically. Especially in case of Fridays For Future, which consists of minors often considered as having 'nothing to bring to the table' by the adults holding the discussion. It can be easily discredited and their actions minimised. Lack of formal authority makes the movement's legitimacy work more like a discourse than a direct political action. Legitimacy in the case of Fridays for Future therefore operates primarily as a moral challenge to existing political authority, rather than as a claim to direct decision-making power. (Scheuerman, 2021; Arendt, 1972)

When directly discussing the strengths of Fridays For Future, their global reach has to be mentioned first. Their ability to use social media to 'spread the word' and unify in action through events, calendar reminders or posts allows them to explain their aims and reach those in far places, without such issues like language barrier or physical place. Due to their lack of elitism they allowed

for wide-spread participation, which in case of the type of Civil Disobedience – School Strikes, that are neither violent nor disruptive to the level of blocking tankers, there is no need to manage operations or ensure they don't cross boundaries that should not be crossed. Another of their strength would be their effectiveness in agenda-setting, they make waves which force discussions to take place, even if they have no direct way of influencing the results. Their way changes the public debate, through *lives*, posts, videos, they are able to shape the perception of their actions without relaying on the public media and in some cases allowing them to correct those reports that do not work in their favour. The mobilisation of youth, globally, despite not being as 'spectacular' as Greenpeace's actions, puts moral pressures on the institutions to act.

But, just as with other movements, Fridays For Future have their weaknesses. They lack a singular, clearly defined political goal (like CFCs), the ratio of mobilisation resulting in real policy outcomes is quite low. Furthermore, due to their age and social status they are susceptible to delegitimisation. And finally despite being a global movement that relies on being wide-spread they are predominantly that – spread wide and what follows – unevenly and in some places thinly. These limitations do not invalidate the movement, but shape the conditions under which its form of civil disobedience can be politically effective.

Now, to clearly compare and contrast these two case studies this essay will divide those comparisons into sub categories: Sources of legitimacy, Types of disruption, Structure and scale, and lastly Effectiveness.

The sources of legitimacy used by both Greenpeace and Fridays For Future vary significantly, serving as a reflection of their organisational form and historical context. Greenpeace's legitimacy during the anti-CFC campaign came from the scientific authority and expert knowledge. By choosing to associate their goals with established scientific research on ozone depletion, Greenpeace managed to frame its civil disobedience as a rational and evidence-based response to clearly defined environmental harm. It allowed them to present their goals not as ideology, but rather as acting on behalf of objective, verified knowledge. In contrast, Fridays For Future grounds its legitimacy predominantly in moral authority and claims intergenerational justice. Instead of using scientific expertise as their main focus, the movement uses the unequal distribution of responsibility and consequences between current decision makers and the future generations. While Greenpeace's model privileges epistemic legitimacy, Fridays For Future operates through ethical and social legitimacy. This contrast forms a reasonable basis for comparison, as both movements seek to justify civil disobedience under conditions of political inaction, yet do so by mobilising different forms of authority shaped by their organisational structure and historical context.

The types of disruption employed by Greenpeace and Fridays For Future further illustrate the differences between the two case studies of civil disobedience. Greenpeace's actions during the anti-CFC campaign relied on high visible, symbolic forms of non-violent disruption, often framed through a 'David versus Goliath' dynamic. Small boats confronting massive tankers or big corporations served to dramatise the corporate power and governmental inaction, turning disruption into a communicative spectacle designed to attract media attention. In contrast, Fridays for Future adopted a less spectacular but performed on a grander scale type of disruption through mass school strikes. Rather than targeting physical infrastructure, these actions disrupted social expectations surrounding education and civic compliance. While less confrontational in appearance, school strikes function as non-violent disruption by taking away participation from established routines, therefore signalling the perceived urgency of the climate emergency. Both forms of disruption rely on restraint rather than force, reinforcing their claims to legitimacy while affecting the public and political response. This contrast provides a reasonable basis for comparison, as both movements employ non-violent disruption to challenge political inaction, while adapting the form and scale of disruption to their respective organisational structures and social contexts. (Tufekci, 2017; Scheuerman, 2021)

The two case studies compared and contrasted in this essay employ different organisational structures and operate on different scales. Greenpeace operates as a non-governmental organisation, with centralised structure and clear, set goals. This model allows them to strategically control the

non-violent disruptions in most effective way whilst minimising the risk of non-sanctioned actions. Their elitism, directly contrasting with Fridays For Future, comes from their professional activists and experts. On the other hand, this also limits their scale, as Greenpeace during the anti-CFCs did not have means to expand beyond limited area and it was necessary to them to limit their actions to specific locations and actors. In contrast, Fridays For Future is a social movement rather than an organisation, it is decentralised and relies on the participant's individual morality and adherence to the ideology, to keep the actions at appropriate level of non-violent disruption.(Snow et al., 2018) As it is a decentralised movement it also lacks hierarchy and therefore personal accountability for the actions taken in the name of the movement. This allows for vast expansion and participation by general population. This also further means that there is no way to control their actions. This contrast provides a reasonable basis for comparison, as both movements seek to mobilise civil disobedience under conditions of political inaction, while adopting organisational forms that shape the scale, control and risks of their strategies. (Snow et al., 2018; Tufekci, 2017)

Just as the previous aspects the effectiveness of both movements vary and at its core has to be assessed based on their goals as well. Greenpeace during the anti-CFCs actions had a clear goal – to combat them, combat the ozone depletion and prevent further harm to the environment, which it successfully achieved by utilising appropriate non-violent disruption, carefully crafted media image, pressure through both the scientific data authority and public opinion resulting in the creation of Montreal Protocol, setting a direct connection between a clear goal and clear result. On the other hand, Fridays For Future's school strikes were aiming to bring people's attention to the environmental crisis, hoping to change the norm of behavior and influence the policy makers into adjusting their own actions. Their effectiveness lies in exactly that, agenda setting and norm shifting, raising awareness and affecting the environment directly through actions of those involved. This results not in direct policy wins, but rather in moral pressures and long-term influence and possible minimisation of costs being shouldered by future generations. This contrast provides a reasonable basis for comparison, as both movements pursue environmental governance change through civil disobedience, yet their effectiveness must be evaluated through different success criteria: Greenpeace through concrete policy outcomes and Fridays For Future through agenda-setting and norm-shifting over time.

This essay has compared Greenpeace's anti CFC campaign and Fridays for Future's school strikes as two distinct models of civil disobedience within environmental activism. The comparison is not arbitrary, because both cases respond to perceived political inaction through non-violent disruption, while utilising different forms of authority they mobilise, the disruptive logics they use, and the organisational structures through which they operate. Greenpeace demonstrates a model in which epistemic legitimacy, carefully stage disruption and structured, careful control can result in direct policy outcomes, culminating in the Montreal Protocol. Fridays For Future shows a contrasting model in which decentralised mobilisation and intergenerational moral claims generate legitimacy and political pressure through agenda setting and norm shifting, rather than immediate governmental change. After contrasting and comparing both, these case studies show that civil disobedience cannot be assessed strictly through legality or short-term policy wins. Instead, its legitimacy and effectiveness depend on how protest strategies align with context: the public perception, the movement's capacity and the public meanings produced through disruption. In the context of the climate emergency, where the damage escalates over long periods of time and responsibility is unequally levelled, both models show different but complementary routes through which civil disobedience can shape governance and public response.

Reading List:

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